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*Study*

The democratic quality of European Citizens' panels  
(Conference on the Future of Europe)

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European Citizens' panels  
(Conference on the Future of Europe)**



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## Abstract

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The European Union (EU) has developed participatory and deliberative procedures since the 2000s. Scholarship has highlighted the biases of such experiences, which do not fit with democratic standards of citizen participation and deliberation, whether in terms of representativeness, weak and non-conflictual deliberation, without incidence on policies. This paper's aim is to analyse whether these pitfalls can be found in the citizens' panels of the Conference on the Future of Europe. This case study is valuable since it is an unprecedented experiment, in terms of its scale and the means deployed, its duration (1 year), the random selection of hundreds of citizens coming from 27 States, and the inter-institutional agreement of the Council of the EU, the Parliament and the Commission. The democratic quality of the citizens' panel process is assessed on specific criteria mentioned in the literature and on the claims expressed by the COFOE organisers (inclusiveness, level of information, interactivity, openness, internal accountability).

## Résumé

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Depuis les années 2000, les institutions de l'Union européenne (UE) ont organisé un nombre important de dispositifs de participation et de délibération citoyenne. Il existe déjà une littérature bien fournie sur l'étude de ces dispositifs, qui converge sur les biais de telles expériences, qui ne correspondent pas aux standards démocratiques de la participation citoyenne. Il s'agit de se demander, en interrogeant la qualité démocratique des panels citoyens européens de la Conférence sur l'Avenir de l'Europe (COFOE), si l'on retrouve de tels écueils. Ce cas d'étude est d'autant plus intéressant qu'il s'agit d'une expérience inédite, par son ampleur et les moyens déployés, sa durée (1 an), la sélection aléatoire de centaines de citoyens, l'accord interinstitutionnel du Conseil de l'UE, du Parlement et de la Commission. La qualité démocratique du processus du panel de citoyens est analysée sur la base de critères spécifiques mentionnés dans la littérature et dans les revendications des artisans de la COFOE (inclusivité, niveau d'information, interactivité, ouverture, reddition interne de comptes).



## INTRODUCTION

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Citizen participatory and deliberative procedures at all levels of government have been developed over several decades. The introduction of such procedures is often justified because they address the crisis of confidence of citizens in their elected representatives and decision-makers (Elstub and Escobar, 2019). The European institutions are not unconcerned about this situation, insofar as academic criticism of the European Union's democratic deficit (Majone, 1998; Mény, 2002) has been acknowledged by the Commission (European Commission, 2003). The Commission has, since the mid-2000s, organised several experiments in citizen participation.

European Union (EU) citizen mechanisms have already been well studied. Whether dealing with citizens' conferences (Boussaguet and Dehousse, 2009), European citizens' consultations (Karlsson, 2010) or other procedures (Kies and Nanz, 2014), most scholars bring out the democratic bias of such experiences and how this reduces their democratic potential.

First, several studies highlight the lack of representativeness among the citizens participating in EU online or offline citizen procedures (Boussaguet and Dehousse, 2009; Karlsson, 2010; Kies and Nanz, 2014). They described participants as more educated than average and initially pro-European. For Karlsson (2010), this lack of social representativeness implies an ideological homogeneity of the participants. He deduces that deliberation was weak when citizens participated in European citizens' consultations. Other studies point to the framing of European citizen experiments as too broad to result in relevant citizen contributions (Hüller, 2010; Karlsson, 2021; Kies and Nanz, 2014; Kies and Wojcik, 2010). Finally, several studies mention the limited effect of citizen-to-citizen exchanges on policies (Badouard, 2014; Monnoyer-Smith and Talpin, 2014; Smith, 2014), or that deliberative or participatory procedures are essentially symbolic (Aldrin and Hubé, 2011; Boussaguet, 2016).

This paper re-examines these results in light of a new experiment—the Conference on the future of Europe (COFOE)—for several reasons. Firstly, because the European institutions, following the first experiences studied, have had time to perfect their knowledge of participatory and deliberative procedures. The COFOE took place 16 years after the first citizens' conferences studied by Boussaguet and Dehousse (2009). Secondly, the COFOE is the most sophisticated experiment of citizen participation at EU level since the citizen turn



of the European Union.<sup>1</sup> It can be considered as a democratic innovation (Saward, 2000) in terms of its dedicated budget (four times that of the Citizen Convention for Climate in France) and its geographical extension (to all 27 member states). Overall, for the first time, the three EU legislative institutions—the European Parliament, the Council of the EU and the European Commission—agreed on such a Conference being established and partly based on sortition.<sup>2</sup>

One can hypothesize that the COFOE (and more specifically the European citizens' panels under discussion) did not reproduce the biases mentioned in the literature. Indeed, the citizens were selected by sortition based on statistical representativeness, and the organisers of the COFOE wanted to attract “European citizens from all walks of life and corners of the Union”<sup>3</sup> to such an extent that citizens should be representative of the EU population. Moreover, the three EU institutions initially suggested that citizen inputs would not only be consultative.<sup>4</sup> More broadly, the Joint Declaration launching the COFOE states that the conference is based on inclusiveness, transparency, and openness. This paper tests empirically these guiding principles through specific criteria. It assesses whether the COFOE citizens' panels reproduced the criticisms mentioned in the literature.

The outcome of the Conference, both before its launch in 2021 and during the process, was relatively unclear and highly controversial (for example, whether it would lead to a reform of the treaties between the three institutions<sup>5</sup>). Nonetheless, there were high expectations of COFOE, particularly from some Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), such as Guy Verhofstadt, Co-President of the COFOE executive team on behalf of the European Parliament, members of the European Commission (commissioners, employees of the Commission's permanent representations in the member states) and some federalist movements. For these optimists, the COFOE was supposed to establish a genuinely transnational and inclusive public space.

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<sup>1</sup> I prefer to talk about the citizen turn, rather than the participatory turn, since the latter expression has often been used to characterise the European Commission's initiatives to involve interest groups and institutionalised civil society (Saurugger, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> European Parliament, Council of the EU, European Commission, *Joint declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe. Engaging with citizens for democracy. Building a more resilient Europe*, March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe, *Rules of Procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe*, 2021, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Remarks of a representative in France of the European Commission, observation of a webinar “En route to COFOE”, 29 April 2021.

<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of COFOE in April 2021, representatives of the Commission addressed the possibility of reforming the Treaties. This position would be criticised during COFOE by the representatives of the states.



In relation to the initial intentions of the COFOE organisers, the main question here is the following: **did the citizens’ panels of the Conference on the Future of Europe reproduce the critical findings of the literature on the experiments in EU citizen participation?** To address this question, the democratic quality of European citizens’ panels is assessed, using the collected data and indicators already used in the literature on citizen deliberation.

This paper is based on original data collection. I participated as an observer at the Conference on the Future of Europe in two European citizens’ panels, one on “EU democracy, values, rights, rule of law, security”, and the other on “Stronger economy, social justice, jobs, education, culture, sport, digital transformation”. Firstly, a survey was distributed to 31 citizens on three occasions (September 2021, November 2021, December 2021/March 2022). They were interviewed about the different aspects listed above. Table 1 shows some statistical characteristics of the citizens interviewed on three occasions.

**Table 1. The surveyed population**

<b>Total population</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
<b>31 citizens</b>	22 men; 9 women	From 20 to over 70 years old	7 Spaniards; 5 French; 4 German; 2 Belgian; 2 Bulgarian; 2 Austrian; 2 Finnish; 1 Romanian; 1 Danish; 1 Dutch; 1 Maltese; 1 Greek; 1 Irish; 1 Hungarian

This sample is not representative of the 400 citizens who participated in the two panels under observation (comprising 200 citizens per panel). However, they are diverse enough in terms of nationality, age and profession to question the quality of the experiment from somewhat different social perspectives. They were asked about:

- What was their relationship with the EU before the experiment? (Survey after session 1)
- What did they expect from the experiment before participating? (Survey after session 1)
- What did they understand about what was expected of them as randomly selected citizens?
- Did they prepare themselves independently between each of the three sessions?
- What did they learn from one session to another?

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- What were the positive points from sessions 1, 2, and 3? (3 sub-categories were created from their answers: social links/interactions; positive organizational points; the cognitive interest of the discussions)
  - What were the negative points from sessions 1, 2 and 3? (3 sub-categories were created from their answers: organization; information/experts; the quality of the citizen talk)
  - What did they think of the experts' contributions? Did they feel sufficiently informed?
  - What were their relationships with the citizen ambassadors?

The data was then coded, and thematic tables were developed for each session.<sup>6</sup> Each session was compared to the others to analyse the similarities and differences, as well as the evolution of citizens' opinions from one session to another. Taken together, the perceptions of the 31 citizens' give precious insights into how the randomly selected citizens evaluated the citizens' panels.

In addition, my attendance over 72 hours at each of the three sessions of two citizens' panels allowed for direct observation. At the end of each session, I filled in an observation grid with standardised questions to measure the evolution of the panels using common criteria: the content of briefing material given to sortitioned citizens at the beginning of each session, the framing of the discussions by experts and facilitators, the importance of the facilitator during the citizens' discussions, whether there were any contradictory stances adopted during the citizens' discussions, and whether sortitioned citizens answered each other without the mediation of the facilitator.

My observations were compared with the questionnaires. Thereafter, the approach shifted from the inductive to the abductive,<sup>7</sup> when reading the literature on the democratic quality of deliberative experiments (Kies and Nanz, 2014; Shin and Mikko, 2021; Wright and Scott, 2007). I identified the criteria used by scholars to evaluate whether they were relevant to the collected data. Some were made use of while others were discarded as they seemed prescriptive and normative.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The first section is dedicated to introducing the COFOE, its context and its design. The literature review then focuses on the

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<sup>6</sup> Initial relationships with the EU, perceptions of COFOE before participating, learning for each session (what did they learn), positive and negative points for each session, opinions on the experts for each session, interactions with the citizen ambassadors, how they understand their roles in the citizens' panels.

<sup>7</sup> Coman, R. et al. (2016). *Méthodes de la science politique. De la question de départ à l'analyse des données*. Louvain-la-Neuve. De Boeck Supérieur, 28.



research on deliberative experiments. The selected criteria are then presented to assess the democratic quality of the COFOE. The third section presents the results, based on the criteria, with empirical elements. The final section outlines the commonalities and differences of COFOE citizens' panels in relation to the EU deliberative and participatory experiences already studied in the literature.

## **1. CONTEXT AND DESIGN OF THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' PANELS FROM THE COFOE**

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The COFOE was born out of several factors. While the idea of citizen participation in the EU goes back to at least the 1980s, the citizen turn of the EU, i.e. the organisation of experiments in citizen participation at EU level, started in the early 2000s, in particular with the European Commission's Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate. Unsuccessfully challenging what has been described as a deficit of democratic legitimacy in the EU, through the parliamentarisation of the Union, or the involvement of stakeholders in decision-making, a new doctrine of involving ordinary citizens was put in place. During the first part of the 2010s, the citizen turn of the EU had slowed down. Then, Brexit opened the way to a whole series of reflections, notably those launched by Jean-Claude Juncker, on scenarios for the future of Europe. The aim was to recreate the social link in Europe between European citizens. Among these scenarios, the principle of a conference on the future of Europe with citizen participation emerged. Such a scenario was proposed by several consultancies in deliberative democracy, such as Missions Publiques and the Bertelsmann Stiftung, by think tanks present at European level, for example, the European Policy Centre, and academics, such as political scientists and jurists of the European University Institute. This external lobbying was followed by internal lobbying from EU institutional actors promoting European citizens' assemblies within the institutions. This internal lobbying took place with the arrival of pro-deliberation officials at the head of the Commission's Directorate-General (DG) for Communication, and also with Emmanuel Macron's involvement in the European scene following his election as President of the French Republic in 2017. Indeed, shortly after his election, between 2018 and 2019, he launched an initiative entitled the European Citizens' Consultations. He also wrote a "letter to European Citizens" just before the 2019 European elections, in which he stated "let's set up [...] a Conference for Europe to propose all the changes our political project needs, with an open mind, even to amending the treaties. This conference will need to engage with citizens' panels". Moreover, according to rumours circulated by COFOE organizers, Macron would have conditioned his support for Ursula Von Der Leyen as President of the Commission in 2019 on, among other things, a Conference on



the Future of Europe. Furthermore, France is said to have tried to influence first Germany and then Portugal, which at that time held the rotating EU Council presidency, over the implementation of the conference (interviews with two members of Missions Publiques on 13 July 2022 and 16 August 2022). Finally, at the European Parliament (EP) level, several German activists for citizen participation had privileged links with German MEPs belonging to the Spinelli Group, who convinced other members of the Group, including Guy Verhofstadt.

The COFOE was officially launched on 9 May 2021. From the outset, the official objectives of the Conference were rather vague. As official documents mentioned:

The Conference on the Future of Europe will open a new space for debate with citizens to address Europe's challenges and priorities [...].<sup>8</sup>

The elusiveness of the practical outcome of the Conference is deliberately maintained by the co-presidency of the COFOE, which was composed of Guy Verhofstadt for the European Parliament, Dubravka Šuica for the Commission, and the Slovenian Minister for European Affairs, representing the EU Council. Indeed, the three institutions did not agree on the need to link the Conference to a reform of the treaties, and some members of the Council were downright opposed to such a constituent project. From the very beginning, there was intense speculation about the concrete outcome of the COFOE,<sup>9</sup> and the Commission and the European Parliament, which were rather in favour of a revision of the treaties, left the outcome in doubt for part of the process. Maintaining such elusiveness brought the three institutions together, even though they do not have the same goals, and defused the thorny issue of treaty reform.

The COFOE was organized through three pillars. From April 2021, a digital platform was set up, where theoretically any EU citizen could participate, propose, and vote on proposals in ten thematic streams.<sup>10</sup> 18,850 proposals were recorded (as of 9 November 2022). On the platform, the 50,000 users, and in particular civil society organisations, were able to take part in thematic events, organised locally or digitally. 6,661 events were recorded as of 9 November 2022). A company was commissioned to synthesise the platform's contributions, which were then transmitted to the citizens' panels and plenary sessions. Four European

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<sup>8</sup> European Parliament, Council of the EU, European Commission, *Joint declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe. Engaging with citizens for democracy. Building a more resilient Europe*, March 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Consider for instance: Brueghel, "The Conference on the Future of Europe: vehicle for reform versus forum for reflection?", June 15th, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://futureu.europa.eu/>



citizens' panels were subsequently established<sup>11</sup> for the purpose of thematic discussions between 200 randomly selected citizens from the 27 member states. Such sortitioned citizens had to express themselves on the “future of Europe” according to various themes: stronger economy, social justice, jobs, education, culture, sport and digital transformation (Panel 1); democracy, values and rights, the rule of law and security (Panel 2); climate and health (Panel 3); and foreign policy and migration (Panel 4). Each panel met on three occasions, each time for three days.

Concerning the sortition process, two contracts were concluded between the DG for Communication from the European Commission and a company specialising in surveys, following these criteria.

The COFOE should reflect Europe's diversity [...]. These panels should be representative of the sociological diversity of the European Union population. We would therefore like to invite a randomly selected group of citizens covering geographical origin, socio-economic background, education, gender, and age to give the outcome of the discussions a higher credibility.<sup>12</sup>

The selection process fitted with the representativeness of European citizens in terms of nationality (proportional to the population of the member states), gender, urban/rural context, profession, and educational background. However, the actual sample was not fully representative, since there was an over-representation of young people, who were a third of the 800. But attracting young people was considered as an intended purpose by the COFOE organisers. This is therefore a deliberate distortion of strict representativeness. Furthermore, during the selection process, the sortitioned citizens were not obliged to participate and, as will be demonstrated, this induced a self-selection bias. Indeed, a panel that was relatively representative of European citizens but lacked diversity in terms of attitudes towards the EU would have weakened deliberation if there was no contradictory exchange of arguments (taking Manin's definition of deliberation, 1985). As will be further considered, citizens were relatively well represented sociologically, but they were above all initially and to a large extent “indifferent” to the EU (Van Ingelgom, 2014). There were very few convinced Europhiles or Eurosceptics.

The selected citizens who agreed to participate received a daily financial allowance along with their travel and subsistence costs, all covered by EU institutions. In our informal conversations, they expressed that they had not been fully briefed on the Conference but

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to nationally organised citizens' panels whose rules are not harmonized and which have given rise to various activities depending on the member states.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, Specific contracts on sortition with Kantar Belgium, 2020 and 2021.



were only told that it was about reflecting, together with citizens from other member states, on the future of Europe. Overall, although no figures are available, it seems that few citizens dropped out of the experience, and those who could not always travel were able to attend the online citizens' panels that were held offline.

These sortitioned citizens were responsible for elaborating recommendations, which they refined during three sessions (one in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, the second on a digital platform, while the third took place within a symbolic European setting, for example the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence or Dublin Castle). In each panel, citizens alternated moments of discussion in thematic sub-groups (between 10 and 15 people), moderated by a facilitator, and moments when they met as a group of 200 to listen to experts, be informed of the progress of the process or vote on the final recommendations at the end of the third session.

The facilitators were drawn from a consortium of four deliberative democracy consultancies from four different countries: Missions Publiques for France, the Danish Board of Technology for Denmark, Deliberativa for Spain and IFOK for Germany. Missions Publiques coordinated the whole consortium. In discussions with some of the consultants, it became clear that the design and the framing of the citizens' panels were imposed by the COFOE Co-Presidency. Indeed, while the consultants wanted the citizens to deliberate on a particularly tricky issue at EU level,<sup>13</sup> the Co-Presidency preferred to adopt a broad framing that followed previous EU citizen participation procedures. In contrast, the consultancies were quite free to propose the organisation of the citizens' panels and lead their facilitation. Indeed, the facilitators had a very important role in the exchanges between citizens.

As with other citizens' conferences, citizens were able to interact with experts. These experts were selected in a non-transparent way by the COFOE Co-Presidents, and the citizens had no real say in the choice of experts. In the first and second sessions, the experts gave relatively general presentations on the state of one area or another of EU law or presented various solutions, always with a view to deepening European integration. There was little in the way of contrasting or contradictory expertise. After the presentations, which lasted about 15 minutes, citizens were able to ask questions. In the last session, experts were present, but in accordance with the principle of reverse expertise: they intervened in the citizens' discussions only if the latter addressed specific questions to them.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, as stated by a consultant from Missions Publiques (August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022): “wondering why we don't have the climate policies to achieve climate neutrality or why we're still not in the digital world that people want to be in”.



After elaborating a set of recommendations the panels voted for them:<sup>14</sup> 48 recommendations were voted out of 51 for the economy panel and 39 out of 42 for the democracy panel. These recommendations were then forwarded to the plenary sessions. The last pillar referred to was the plenary sessions. These included Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), national MPs, members of the Council and the Commission, trade unions and representatives of European civil society, as well as citizen ambassadors. There were 20 of them drawn from each panel, numbering 80 in total, and they worked mostly in thematic working groups where rules were not harmonised. They were to debate the recommendations drawn up by the European citizens' panels, the national citizens' panels and the summaries of the online platform.

This study focuses on two European citizens' panels.

## **2. HOW TO ASSESS THE QUALITY OF A DELIBERATIVE EXPERIMENT**

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### **2. 1. How has the literature evaluated deliberative practices?**

The literature on the democratic quality of citizen participation and deliberation mechanisms provides many criteria for their evaluation.

In their study on the OmaStadi participatory budgeting project in Helsinki (Finland), Shin and Rask (2021) develop several indicators to interrogate their case study. The first objective criterion is that of "participation". This measures the frequency of participation, or responses, among participants. It can help to assess the inclusiveness of a deliberative experiment to see whether all citizens participate equally, or whether there are instances of monopolising speech. The next criterion is that of "deliberation". This evaluates the reactivity between participants (whether citizens respond to each other), interdependence (who interacts with whom) and engagement (the variability of engagement in the conversation from a temporal perspective). These criteria are heuristic, but they are used to analyse an online deliberation, which is not the object of study here. I prefer to incorporate inclusiveness in my criteria, and also the interactivity between participants (which mixes reactivity and engagement in Shin and Rask's vocabulary).

Further indicators are developed from other deliberative experiments. More precisely, the literature on deliberative experiments in the EU can be considered here. First, in their study

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<sup>14</sup> 70% approval of the 200 citizens per panel was needed for a recommendation to be voted on.



of web-deliberation at the 2009 European Citizens Consultation, Kies and Wojcik (2010) evaluate the experiment using several criteria. They assess the inclusiveness of the forum studied (number of participants, number of posts), the representativeness of the participants in terms of nationalities (since it is a multi-national experiment), the Habermasian quality of the conversations (reflexivity, justification, equality, respect, topicality), and the impact of the experiment on European public action. I only select for my own study the criteria of inclusiveness and the origin of the participants. Regarding the Habermasian quality of the conversations, the authors state:

The deliberativeness of the proposals was assessed 1) by counting and comparing the number of proposals and votes in different countries; 2) by assessing whether for the most voted proposals a justification was provided for their implementation; 3) by evaluating the concreteness of the proposals, i.e. whether they are based on measures that are clear and applicable; 4) by assessing whether they are related to the topic of the consultation (topicality) (2010: 201).

To consider how the political scientist can “evaluate whether the proposals are based on measures that are clear and applicable” is highly subjective.<sup>15</sup> The criterion of the impact of the experiment on public action is more heuristic, but difficult to justify, especially in my case where the COFOE has only ended recently, and it will take years to evaluate its consequences. For these reasons, I do not retain either the qualitative criterion or the criterion relating to the impact on public policies.

Finally, a book has been compiled that focuses on both physical and online experiments in citizen participation and deliberation at the EU level (Kies and Nanz, 2014). By gathering various contributions (for example Europolis, European Citizens’ Consultations, Your Voice in Europe, Ideal-EU), the authors highlight certain criteria, such as “inclusion”, the “level of information provided to citizens”, quality of speaking (in terms of interactivity, respect and justification), “civic impact”, impact on decision making, and media coverage of experiments.

For the present case study, the criteria relating to representativeness and equal time of speaking (grouped under the criterion of inclusiveness), the level of information provided to citizens, and the interactivity of discussions between citizens (do they respond directly to each other, or do they exchange through the mediation of the facilitator?) will be used. Furthermore, while civic impact is a relevant criterion, it is difficult to assess in the case

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<sup>15</sup> The field scholar can study the structures of citizens’ arguments, showing that citizens sometimes base their arguments on law, morality or emotional registers. But in no case can or should they attest to the “reasonability” of an argument.



under study. As the COFOE was limited to a few months' duration, it would be a daunting challenge to analyse whether the COFOE participation encouraged citizens to continue in politics after the citizens' panels. As a modest measure of civic impact, another indicator will be used, namely "learning process".

Drawing on existing literature, the democratic quality of European citizens' panels is analysed to highlight whether the same pitfalls were found as those highlighted by the literature on citizen participatory and deliberative procedures implemented by EU institutions.

## 2. 2. Justification and explanation of the selected criteria

To assess the quality of a deliberative experiment, one can start from the principles and the declaration of intent of those who have piloted the experiment. To recall, these are inclusiveness, openness and transparency. Inclusiveness refers to the principle of inclusion mentioned in the existing literature (Kies and Nanz, 2014), namely both the question of representativeness and the equal right to participation for sortitioned citizens. Transparency is an overused concept in the literature, but has not been clearly defined. It can be understood as both a mechanism for publicising deliberative experiments for the maxi-public and as a mechanism for making decision-makers accountable to participating citizens as a process unfolds. In the end, the principle of openness is unclear. It is assumed to mean that citizens' panels are a space for free discussion. I will contend that in the panels there are limits to this principle.

### 1) **Inclusiveness**

Inclusiveness refers first of all to representativeness in terms of the socio-professional characteristics of the sample of citizens and is considered as a standard of democratic legitimacy (see in particular: Hierlemann et al., 2022). Bearing in mind that "European citizens from all walks of life and corners of the Union will be able to participate, with young Europeans playing a central role in shaping the future of the European project",<sup>16</sup> such inclusiveness will be questioned.

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<sup>16</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe, *Rules of Procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe*, 2021, p. 1.



Through direct observations, I also assess the capacity of the selected citizens to express themselves. Is there equality in speaking time?<sup>17</sup> The multilingual nature of the citizens' panels will raise questions about whether certain nationalities participate more than others in the discussions (Kies and Wojcik 2010), or whether this is due to other characteristics.

## 2) **Level of information**

The rules of procedure state that the Conference must provide citizens with “the necessary time for preparation, information sharing and feedback”.<sup>18</sup> I develop two sub-criteria to verify this.

The first is conformity to scholars' allegations (Monnoyer-Smith and Talpin, 2014). I will focus on to what extent the citizens considered that they were provided with balanced information throughout the process. The briefing materials that they received on their arrival at the first session will be analysed, and also the citizens' answers to the survey I distributed them. In addition, citizens were asked about their appreciation of the experts' contribution to each session of the panels being studied.

The second criterion is more singular. For each session, citizens were questioned about what they had learned. While it is not possible to measure the civic impact (Kies and Nanz, 2014), the learning process will be examined. The citizens' perceptions will then be compared with my own observations.

## 3) **Interactivity of citizens' talking**

Rather than consider the normative concern of the “quality” of citizens' talking, their interactivity (Pedrini and Bächtiger, 2010) will be investigated. This latter can be defined as whether citizens discuss and respond to each other. In other words, the dialogical or monological character of the discussions is assessed. I will ask, for example, whether citizens interact without the facilitator's mediation. Even more important for the analysis, I will identify whether there were forms of argumentative conflict, which can be considered as a subdimension of interactivity.

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<sup>17</sup> In their study on online deliberation, Monnoyer-Smith and Talpin (2014) asked if everyone was able to express themselves equally.

<sup>18</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe, *Rules of Procedure...*, p. 3.



Beyond these classic criteria from the literature, citizens' panels are evaluated by criteria that question aspects thought to be innovative by those who designed the experiment.

#### 4) **Internal accountability**

Accountability is defined as the obligation to explain and justify conduct (Bovens, 2007). Internal accountability refers specifically to the way in which the citizens participating in the citizens' panels are informed of the workings of the process. This contrasts with external accountability, which is related to the wider public, to citizens outside the experiment.

In the context of the COFOE, two sub-criteria can be identified to assess internal accountability. The first refers to the transparency of the process: are citizens informed about the process as such, about what is expected of them and what their discussions lead to? Here, transparency and accountability are closely related, since the question is whether the organisers of the experiment have sufficiently informed the participating citizens. The other aspect is connected to the citizen ambassadors at the conference. These ambassadors act as a bridge between the citizens' panels and the plenary sessions. Is this delegation mechanism effective in terms of accountability? Can non-ambassador citizens bring their suggestions to the plenary sessions through citizen ambassadors' voices?

#### 5) **Openness**

Openness is the last criterion. Although it is a principle mentioned by the joint declaration, it nonetheless remains vague. As there is no precision, this criterion will be assessed on the basis of a sentence in the rules of procedure document: "The Conference aims to give citizens a say on what matters to them."<sup>19</sup>

The openness of the Conference will be questioned, starting from the premise that the framework of the citizens' panels should not impose a specific "citizen's role" (Talpin, 2006).

Are the institutions striving to impose a predetermined understanding of what citizens can ask for within the panels? In short, do the institutions expect citizens to ask for more European integration at all costs?

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<sup>19</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe, *Rules of Procedure...*, p. 3.



**Table 2. Criteria for assessing the quality of a citizen instrument**

Criteria	Inclusivity	Level of information	Interactivity	Internal accountability	Openness
<b>Dimensions</b>	Representativity and equal talking time	Citizens' opinions on balanced information and experts	Monological or dialogical aspects and conflictual dimension in citizen talks	Transparency and attitudes to citizen ambassadors	Free agenda-setting by citizens

### **3. FINDINGS AND LIMITS OF THE DELIBERATIVE EXPERIMENT**

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#### **3. 1. Inclusiveness**

##### *3.1.1 Representativeness of randomly selected citizens*

The selection seems to fit with the representativeness of European citizens in terms of nationality (proportional to the population of the member states), gender, urban/rural context, profession, and educational background. There is an over-representation of young people (one-third). However, this is not a problem as it was clearly foreseen by the European institutions before the launch of the Conference.

When I surveyed the citizens, many praised the “diversity of people” within the panels. Others emphasised the lack of representativeness of the citizens’ panels, with at least 5 of the 31 citizens interviewed insisting on it. One of them was a German citizen in her 30s: “You should pay attention to a greater diversity of people and not only people who are pro-Europe. There should be a greater selection of different people, different social classes and also religions.” It is worth noting that the “social class” criterion had to be respected (through the prism of occupation). However, no ethnic or religious criteria were considered. Moreover, officially, the selected citizens are not “pro-Europe”, since the aim is to involve citizens who do not have a predefined opinion on European issues (negative or positive). However, the last citizen’s impression can be explained in the light of two elements. Firstly, the feeling of under-representation of popular social groups is linked to the fact that they are less likely to speak in citizen discussions, as we shall see, and are therefore less visible. Secondly, it should be stressed that there are self-selection biases among citizens when they are recruited (Isernia et al., 2014). Indeed, participation in citizens’ panels was not mandatory. Although the citizens’ panels were socially representative, the citizens likely to



take part in them shared some predispositions: attending panels sometimes during working hours, travelling several times to Strasbourg or another European city, having the ability to express themselves publicly, etc. This is an important contribution to the literature on sortition in politics. A sample can be representative of the EU population, yet suffer from self-selection bias, thereby marginalising both individuals who feel less able to talk about politics and citizens who, critical of the EU, might wonder what the point is of taking part in an experiment organised by the EU if they feel that the EU is not necessary. Thus, the citizens' panels depart from the observation of social homogeneity (Karlsson, 2010) or over-educated individuals (Monnoyer-Smith and Talpin, 2014) found in other citizens' experiments organised by the EU. However, this induces other biases, which should be taken into account in future experiments in deliberative democracy.

### 3.1.2 Equal time for speaking

As with all experiments involving the participation of ordinary citizens (Talpin, 2007), a hypothesis could be formulated: there is an imbalance in speaking time within the discussion groups, even with the presence of a facilitator who is supposed to guarantee equality of speech. The bulk of evidence is provided by my own observations.

**Table 3. Number of interventions for a discussion group (panel on economy, 10 people)**

	<i>Italian citizen (m)</i>	<i>Irish citizen (m)</i>	<i>Italian citizen (f)</i>	<i>Italian citizen (f)</i>	<i>French citizen (f)</i>	<i>Finnish citizen (m)</i>	<i>Finnish citizen (f)</i>	<i>French citizen (m)</i>	<i>French citizen (f)</i>	<i>Romanian citizen (f)</i>
<i>4 discussions of a given group (session 3)</i>	28	20	39	9	26	9	14	16	3	4

**Table 4. Number of interventions for a discussion group (panel on democracy, 9 people)**



	German citizen (f)	French citizen (m)	French citizen (f)	Greek citizen (m)	Greek citizen (f)	German citizen (f)	Hungarian citizen (f)	Hungarian citizen (m)	German citizen (m)
4 discussions of a given group (session 3)	17	7	3	19	3	11	9	4	16

In the first example, men speak more than women, whereas in the second example there is more of a balance. In both examples, some female citizens speak very little (a French woman in the first example, a Greek woman in the second). In the first example, Italians and French tend to speak more, while in the second, it is the Germans and a Greek man who monopolise the debate, and the French contribute very little. In the second example, there is a dialogue between two older men and two younger women, which invalidates the usually assumed distinctions of gender or age inequality in speaking.

Above all, the ability to speak, which is socially embedded and determined by gender, profession, education and family background, mainly explains the inequalities in speaking time. As already stated, the facilitators tried to rebalance speaking time for all participants, but there were no systematically equal opportunities for speaking. A democratic bias in the form of an imbalance in speaking time was found here, and it can also be found in situations of citizen participation and deliberation organized by EU institutions (Kies, Leyenaar and Niemöller, 2014) and in experiments outside the EU. Thus, paradoxically, political inequalities are reproduced within deliberative situations where citizens are supposed to have an equal say.

### 3. 2. Level of information

#### 3.2.1. *Balanced information and experts*

Did the participants receive balanced information? This is an important criterion in view of the deliberation experiments. For one cannot expect that citizens who are supposed to be initially indifferent (without a predefined opinion) to the EU will know a great deal about European politics. It is, therefore, during the process itself that citizens need to be educated.

My survey revealed that half of the 31 citizens were critical of the first session in terms of the quality of the information provided and the quality of the experts' interventions. For the second session, half expressed a positive opinion, 6 a mixed opinion and 4 were critical. For



the third session, most citizens had no opinion: 6 of the 31 were critical and 4 were positive. The following is an example of a critical voice.

Belgian citizen under 20: I missed more information about the topics we were going to discuss. We got a PDF document with a bit of info. But a lot of that info was a link to an idea on the online platform. I think it would have been better if we got more info that was a little more in-depth.

Despite the lack of information at the first session of the citizens' panel, a German citizen stated that there was an improvement at the second session: "definitely we got a lot of info at the 2nd session to move forward. The 2nd session finalized everything and now we are on a good day."

Turning to the citizens' assessment of the experts, the most critical citizens were in the minority.

Spanish citizen in his 20s, first session, Panel 1: I found the experts' contributions very general; also, the lack of concreteness about what was expected from the participants made the debates a bit sterile, aimless, and boring.

German citizen in his 30s, first session, Panel 2: during the 1st session I found that the presentation of the experts was more focused on the topics they wanted to present rather than the questions the citizens wanted to ask.

Other citizens had more mixed feelings: "The details given by the experts are interesting but too limited" (Belgian citizen in her 70s, 2nd session, Panel 1); "The conversations with the experts should have been longer and maybe we should have heard from more experts" (Bulgarian citizen, in his 20s, 2nd session, Panel 2); "The experts came up with very concrete examples and so the discussions in the group were very much influenced by the examples given" (French citizen in his 30s, 2nd session, Panel 2).

Citizens were criticising here the fact that the experts did not interact sufficiently with them. More importantly, the Bulgarian citizen even questioned the representativeness of the experts, while the French citizen claimed that the experts influenced the subgroup discussions and, therefore, the recommendations expressed by the citizens. Finally, some expressed a more positive opinion, such as this Spanish citizen in his 40s (2nd session, panel 1): "The experts gave us an overview of the topics to be discussed in the session. The language was totally accessible."



Thus, the spectrum of citizens' opinions on experts was diverse, and nothing can be generalised. However, the selection of experts monopolised by the COFOE organisers (the co-chair, not the consultancy firms) contrasts with the experience of Meeting of Minds analysed by Mölders and Abels (2007), where citizens were freer to select experts to consult. However, citizens are not overwhelmingly critical of experts, which is surprising, since experts are supposed to provide evidence (Curato et al., 2021) aimed at offering a nuanced view of a situation. In other words, the different experts are not supposed to be aligned in terms of their preferences; yet, in the comments, most experts typically advocated ending unanimity in the Council, or giving the right of legislative initiative to the Parliament—views which are associated with European federalist movements.

In addition to hearing the experts, the citizens were able to obtain information through the briefing material, i.e. the information that the organisers gave them in a booklet. Such briefing material introduced proposals already popular on the digital platform of the conference.<sup>20</sup> This situation was problematic insofar as the randomly selected citizens were likely to be influenced by the content of the platform, in which there was an over-representation of federalist visions of European integration. This is in sharp contrast to other citizens' assemblies or deliberative experiments, since there was no balanced information on the EU. No critical stance towards the EU was provided for citizens, which is in line with the findings of Aldrin and Hubé when analysing Tomorrow's Europe, 2007.

### *3.2.2 Learning process*

In the survey, citizens were asked what they had learned in each session. The answers for the first session converged on the institutional rules of the EU (14 out of 31 responses) and European cultural diversity (5 responses), while a minority of 4 citizens said they had learned nothing. For the second session, it seems citizens mainly learned about their rights as European citizens, which aligned with their feeling of belonging to the EU (Bruter, 2005). However, the proportion of citizens who felt they did not learn anything increased to 8 (compared to 4 in the first session). For the last session, the answers were less explicit, perhaps due to the citizens' feeling of exhaustion with the experiment. They mostly referred to learning about the sense of being European and to experiential knowledge, for example learning to formulate recommendations and practise consensus.

These elements provide information on the civic impact (Kies and Nanz, 2014) of the experiment on citizens. They acquired institutional knowledge, but also, overall, a sense of

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<sup>20</sup> For instance, see the “basic information” document: <https://futureu.europa.eu/assemblies/citizens-panels/f/298/>



belonging to the EU. This converges with other analyses (Aldrin and Hubé, 2011; Isernia et al., 2014; Kies, Leyenaar and Niemöller, 2014). It is legitimate to ask whether the socialising effort of this type of European experience happens at the expense of the quality of the training and the contrasting information offered to citizens.

It is far more difficult to assess whether the civic impact will lead to concrete political practices in the future. From an observational point of view, two types of extreme postures were identified concerning the relationship with learning during the process. Firstly, there are those citizens in the panels who say that they have nothing special to learn, as they know how to express and position themselves according to their own means. From their point of view, the deliberative experiment should only record their recommendations. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those citizens who have a specific relationship with the process: they need to be productive and express concrete demands. To achieve such an objective, they need to learn, and therefore they have high expectations of the training provided by the institutions. Most citizens fall somewhere between the two positions.

### 3. 3. Interactivity

Turning to citizens' opinions, a third of the citizens said the discussions between citizens in the first session were of good quality. Conversely, 1 out of every 3 citizens judged them to be poor. For the second session, the critical relationship to the quality of the deliberations was reversed. 11 out of 31 citizens considered the quality of the discussions to be negative. Only 4 out of 31 citizens praised the quality of the second session in terms of citizens talking. For the third session, the situation is even more diverse since only two citizens expressed criticism. The perceived quality of the discussions thus improved. Let us take a closer look at some of the citizens' considerations which were not necessarily representative, but different enough to be meaningful. First, let us look at two optimistic comments.

Austrian citizen, first session, Panel 1: At some point I felt like a politician in Parliament. Our discussions were really productive.

Spanish citizen, second session, Panel 1: Debates have been very intense [...] but very satisfying, because you learn and become sympathetic to the different countries that are part of the EU [...]; it was very enriching.

Like other citizens in the sample, the Austrian citizen assessed the quality of the discussions in terms of their productivity. This implies a certain relationship with learning and with the exercise of the role of citizen in a deliberative experiment. The Spanish citizen shared a

similar relationship with the experiment, as he valued learning from the situation in other countries. There were also critical comments.

Dutch citizen, first session, Panel 2: The session consisted of sequences of monologues which sometimes related to what somebody else said, and sometimes did not.

German citizen, first session, Panel 2: More background knowledge and preparation of the participants would have facilitated this.

French citizen, second session, Panel 1: We need more exchanges and conflict of ideas and thoughts; for the moment we take turns. I really think that citizens need to debate more directly to bring out the various problems of their daily lives.

French citizen, third session, Panel 2: It was sometimes a bit long, especially when you were stuck on a particular word for hours.

Although negative reports from the citizens on the quality of the discussions were in the minority, they were important for shedding light on the way in which the citizen talks were conducted.

Indeed, the monological nature of the discussions expressed by the Dutch citizen can be explained insofar as the first of the sessions of each panel dealt with a period of deliberation training. The aim was to put the randomly selected citizens, who were not used to taking part in this type of exercise, at ease by giving them minimal guidelines so that they could express themselves relatively freely on the major themes.

During the next two sessions, the citizens refined their recommendations in small discussion groups and went into greater depth from one session to the next. However, the French



Room 12	Bent Noortby	English	Spanish	Hungarian
English - facilitated	idea	idea	idea	idea
Comprehension, solidarity with non-members, free travel	Comprensione, solidarietà con non membri, viaggio gratuito.	Comprensión, solidaridad con no miembros, viajes gratis.	Megértés, szolidaritás nem tagokkal; szabad utazás.	
Same rights, human and animals, common information	Stessi diritti, umani e animali, informazioni comuni.	Mismos derechos, humanos y animales, información común.	Ugyanazok a jogok emberek és állatok közös információ.	
Union for unity, fewer decisions at national level	Unione per unità, meno decisioni a livello nazionale.	Unión para la unidad, menos decisiones a nivel nacional.	Unió az egységért, kevesebb nemzeti szintű döntés.	
Development, digitalization and harmonization of standards	Sviluppo, digitalizzazione e armonizzazione di standard.	Desarrollo, digitalización y armonización de normas.	A szétvágyók fejlesztése digitalizáció és harmonizáció.	
Welfare, climate, education, employment	Benessere, clima, education, occupazione.	Bienestar, Climate, Education, Empleo.	Jólét, éghajlat, oktatás, foglalkoztatás.	
Vision, common language	Visione, lingue comune.	Vision, lenguaje común.	Vízió, közös nyelv.	
Diversity	Diversità	Diversidad	Sokféleség	#VALUE!
Closer Europe on public services and private sector etc.	Più da vicino l'Europa sui servizi pubblici e il settore privato ecc.	Europa más cercana a los servicios públicos y el sector privado, etc.	Közelibbi Európa a közszolgáltatások és magánszektorok felé.	#VALUE!
Diversity among us in a closer Europe	Diversità fra noi in un'Europa più vicina.	Diversidad entre nosotros en una Europa más cercana.	Sokszínűség közöttünk a közeli Európában.	#VALUE!
Chosen common language	Lingua comune scelta	Lenguaje común elegido	A közös nyelv kiválasztása	#VALUE!
	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!
	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!
	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!
	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!
	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!
	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!	#VALUE!



citizen nevertheless recalled that during the subsequent sessions (2 and 3) there had been few real debates and little conflict in the citizens' speaking. Indeed, in each sub-group discussion, about ten citizens of several nationalities deliberated. They spoke in their native language, while the others benefitted from simultaneous translations. There was also a facilitator who took notes of what was said in an Excel table which was visible to all. In this way, citizens could check whether or not what they said had been correctly transcribed. Since the translation was not always ideal, the citizens spent a considerable amount of time commenting on the translations, to the detriment of discussions on the substance of the talks.

*Author's own photographs. On the left, a discussion group in action.  
On the right, the type of document that citizens are asked to comment on.*

Furthermore, the observations revealed that the discussions were always animated by the facilitator. This confirms the predominant role of facilitators in deliberative processes (Coleman and Moss, 2012). There was a paucity of moments of direct exchange between citizens. In other words, there was little interaction without mediation from the facilitator, which made the exchanges more artificial because they were less direct and spontaneous. I was not able to quantify the proportion of mediated and unmediated interactions. While in terms of direct interactivity, talks were limited, this does not mean that citizens did not interact, even in the presence of the facilitator. Apart from the first session, the discussions were not monological, but dialogical. The analysis converges with a fairly pronounced level of interactivity (Kies, Leyenaar and Niëmoller) and contrasts sharply with the experience analysed by Karlsson (2010), where there was found to be little interaction and conflict.

In addition, in sessions 2 and 3, citizens from each focus group went to visit the other groups to interact on the recommendations they were developing. This was commendable, as hearing the opinions of other citizens who had not worked on the recommendations could stimulate deliberation. But this again led to an over-proceduralisation that hindered the fluidity of citizens' speaking, as in the case of the facilitator who checked each time the terms of the recommendations expressed by the citizens. An over-proceduralisation bias was also highlighted in other EU experiments (Abels, 2009; Goldschmidt et al., 2008).

In addition, the interactivity targeting argumentative conflict in citizens' speaking was investigated. I was not able to quantify the proportion of conflictual and consensual exchanges, but the latter were in the majority, and in 32 hours of observation, I found about twenty conflicting exchanges, which is not very many. However, let us give some examples.



In Panel 2, during session 3, I attended an interesting dialogue between a Hungarian and a French citizen, both under 30 years old. They were discussing solutions to the lack of political participation of young people and the question, should there be courses to educate and politicise students?

Hungarian citizen: Imagine a government passing on its own approaches to young people. How will young people be able to think? Will they get unbiased information? On the contrary, they will only get propaganda messages from the government. So, can we include politics in the education system and force this kind of process?

French citizen: It is necessary to popularise. And tell young people what politics is, what is at stake. We don't need to make a political statement. People can understand, have an overview, and also understand what the other countries of the European Union are doing.

The opposition in terms of position—should the state organise the students' politicisation—can be explained in two ways. Firstly, the Hungarian citizen rejects the interference of the state in education, and this can be explained by her national context, where President Orbán is considered relatively illiberal and autocratic. Therefore, in order to protect herself from overexposure to the ideology of power, this citizen prefers to keep the school away from the state. The French citizen considers, in the tradition of the strong state in France, that the state has its place in the process, but that it must remain neutral. On the other hand, the relationship between school and state is thought of differently depending on one's social group, as Barrault-Stella and Huguée (2019) have already proven. Upper-class people tend to consider school as something that should be beyond the control of the state, while the working classes do not.

Other conflicting positions were identified, for example, on the sustainable economy, whether to punitively tax polluting companies or, conversely, to subsidise virtuous companies. Debates on the compulsory or optional nature of voting also expressed non-consensual positions. To conclude, citizens' talking was indeed interactive and relatively consensual, even if the citizens were given little autonomy by the facilitator.

Thus, the European citizens' panel did not refer to situations where conflict is avoided by moderators (Monnoyer-Smith and Talpin, 2014) or is non-existent. (Karlsson, 2010 speaks of a “non-conflictual pattern of participation”.)

### **3. 4. Internal accountability**

Internal accountability is concerned with keeping the process accountable to citizens.



### 3.4.1 Transparency

Were citizens sufficiently informed about the whole process? On this point, one can be rather critical, as throughout the COFOE, the process was subject to political conflicts between European institutions. It would therefore have been difficult to tell the citizens what their recommendations would lead to, as this was not fixed. However, in the survey, citizens were asked to explain how they understood their role in the citizens' panels. Was this clear to them? Did the institutions behind the experiment provide enough information? In this respect, the responses were mixed. For 17 of the 31 citizens, the role was clear.

French citizen: The aim was to discuss specific themes and recommendations which were then approved during the final session of the citizens' panels.

Spanish citizen: we provide ideas that may have general applicability.

Significantly, the first citizen insisted on precision, whereas the second considered the panels as having to produce general guidelines. Secondly, 7 of the 31 citizens interviewed held a mixed opinion on to what extent their role was clear.

Dutch citizen: I think the function of a citizens' panel should be really clearly defined, and it should be organized in relation to this function.

Bulgarian citizen: I think we are supposed to present ideas/problems and solutions for them.

A small minority (2 out of 31) expressed critical positions.

Spanish citizen: No information was given about the methodological process that was going to take place and everybody participated blindly.

German citizen: The EU would like to influence our minds on very early stages [...]. It seems like someone tries to put the words of experts into my mouth [...]. I feel like a doll in a puppet show.

These comments portrayed a fully controlled process, leaving little room for the imagination and wishes of citizens.

While most citizens felt that they understood their role, the COFOE organisers gave citizens an overly elusive role, to enchant the deliberative experiment (as "make your voice heard" was the slogan of the Conference). Thus, paradoxically, this elusive role was not a guarantee of transparency. Citizens were not well informed about what was going to happen next,



what the rules of the next sessions were, and how their recommendations would be dealt with in the plenary sessions.

### *3.4.2 Attitudes to citizen ambassadors*

One of the innovative mechanisms of the experiment was the setting up of a dialogue between, on the one hand, the citizen ambassadors who participated in the COFOE plenary sessions and, on the other hand, MEPs, national MPs, Council and Commission members, and the rest of the citizens on the panels. This allowed the former to be accountable and to inform the latter about the plenary sessions. Non-ambassador citizens were asked about their perceptions of the work of the citizen ambassadors.

The ambassadors were randomly selected, on a voluntary basis, at the end of the first session, and started reporting in the second session. Although a moment of formal exchange between ambassadors and the rest of the citizens' panels on the holding of the plenary sessions was organised at the beginning of the second session, 9 out of 31 citizens stated that they did not know their ambassadors and had never interacted with them.

Spanish citizen: I don't think anything special about them, nor did I have any specific information about their performance.

French citizen: We have never spoken with them.

Maltese citizen: I never met my ambassadors. I felt segregated from them.

One Finnish citizen even said that the principle of ambassadors is a relatively cosmetic one and not very effective: "it seems to me to be more on the marketing side, to be honest".

Few citizens met their ambassadors during the process. However, several ambassadors were present in my survey sample and they emphasised that they often interacted with the citizens on their panel.

At the third session of each panel, the ambassadors were supposed to meet the citizens by completing a questionnaire to bring up citizens' thoughts and misgivings. As a direct observer, I could see that the ambassadors with whom I discussed did not make full use of this role, concentrating instead on making recommendations, like the other citizens on the panel. As a result, links established in practice between ambassadors and non-ambassador citizens were rather weak, although the principle of the accountability of ambassadors to the rest of the panel was relevant (and fits in with the accountability and transparency claimed by the organisers of the experiment).



### 3. 5. Openness

Openness is assessed on the basis of a sentence in the rules of procedure which states: “The Conference aims to give citizens a say on what matters to them.”<sup>21</sup> This criterion is in line with the framing of a citizen deliberation experiment (Gastil, 2014; Wright and Street, 2007), i.e. according to the rules imposed by the decision-makers to organise the participation of randomly selected citizens. The framing is about selected topics for deliberation, the procedure for taking the floor, the facilitator’s role in citizens’ speaking, etc. Based on the observations, it is doubtful whether all existing positions on the EU (Van Ingelgom, 2014) were expressed in the citizens’ panels.

One might have expected this to be the case. The topics on which citizens were invited to deliberate were broad, as in other EU citizen experiments mentioned previously. The collected data comes from two citizens’ panels on “stronger economy, social justice, jobs, education, culture, youth and sport, and digital transformation” (Panel 1), and on “democracy, values, rights, rule of law, and security” (Panel 2). One might naturally think that such a broad thematic framing would have encouraged citizens’ free expression. However, careful observation of several discussion groups showed that highly critical opinions of the EU were in the minority.

By considering the stance taken by citizens, it can be seen that there were few outlets for criticism of European public action. Citizens often criticised the lack of harmonisation of sectoral policies between member states, but rarely European public action as such. However, a relative nuance is introduced, as several citizens criticised the fact that the European Commission would have liked to legislate in terms of education policies, whereas this belonged to the competency of the member states. For these few citizens, the competence should remain national, but this type of position was quite rare. How can it be explained that there was so little criticism in the views of citizens? Two arguments are put forward. In informal discussions with citizens on the panels, most gave the impression that they were free to say what they wanted. They were satisfied and proud to be in the majority and supporting the final recommendations adopted in each panel. However, the results of the citizens’ panels often stopped at general recommendations, or at the political agenda of some federalist MEPs, such as the end of the unanimity rule or the legislative initiative in the European Parliament. Some citizens were aware of the limitations of the recommendations that were made.

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<sup>21</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe, *Rules of Procedure...*, p. 3.



German citizen: I think there are too many [recommendations] and there are also many that already exist in this way.

Belgian citizen: I was very much surprised when I saw that almost all the recommendations were voted on. I was proud that the recommendations that my subgroup made got voted (with a lot of votes as well!) but I am concerned that there are just too many [...]. To be quite honest, I think the politicians will now only focus on the recommendations they like instead of looking at them and working on them.

To put it differently, there was little pluralism in the citizens' recommendations and a lack of diversity in terms of attitudes toward the EU; the recommendations were often oriented towards more European public action and more European integration.

The vagueness of deliberations or consultations driven by the European institutions has been highlighted in other studies (Kies and Wojcik, 2010; Kies, Leyenaar and Niesmöller, 2014), which are consistent with my observations.

However, not everything has to do with the wide imposed framing, which should not be understood as “unframing” or as a synonym for openness. Indeed, openness is also reduced due to the combination with another factor. This relates to an element discussed in the section on inclusiveness. Indeed, the European institutions agreed to select citizens who were representative of European diversity. But one of the criteria that might have been interesting to invest in and be discussed among the institutions<sup>22</sup> refers to citizens' attitudes towards European integration. COFOE organisers could have established a gradation, admittedly difficult to measure, by not limiting the categories to “pro-Europeans” and “anti-Europeans”. There would have been more diversity in citizens' recommendations, and more conflicting deliberation in the citizens' speaking. If the selected citizens embody a social diversity, they are relatively indifferent (Van Ingelgom, 2014), or at least indifferent but with positive dispositions towards European integration.

Thus, self-selection biases, combined with a broad framing, reduced the potential for openness. Citizens had “a say in what matters to them”, but in a defined framework imposed by the institutions. From this point of view, the openness in practice that was supposed to be at the heart of COFOE citizens' panels was limited.

The broad framing chosen is not a non-framing: the broader the framing, the more general the citizens' demands are and indeed the more politically inoffensive they are. EU organisers

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with a “do and thank” organization in charge of the facilitation of the citizens' panels of the COFOE, 12 July 2022.



preferred the expression of general recommendations, which the institutions will be able to reappropriate according to their interests. This limits the political risk of having measures that are too precise and not easily adaptable to the interests of the institutions.

## CONCLUSIONS

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This study evaluated the democratic quality of two European citizens' panels in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe. It was assessed following the initial objectives of the conference. Moreover, criteria from the existing literature were used, in addition to some inductive criteria.

The citizens' panels analysed thus reproduced biases already identified in the literature. The broader the official objectives of a deliberative experiment, the more difficult it is to achieve them. For instance, the principle of "openness" is hard to achieve. I contend that the choice of a broad framing for a deliberative experiment does not mean that it refers to a non-framing. This broad framing can be seen as politically motivated, so that citizens limit themselves to expressing general recommendations. This is in sharp contrast to the French Citizens' Convention for Climate or the Irish Citizen Assembly on Abortion. Paradoxically, a minimalist framing of the institutions behind the deliberative experiment can be detrimental to openness. As long as the citizens' perception of their role is not fully clear, their participation cannot be optimal. This large framing is common in the European Union's experiments of citizen participation. Existing studies claim that broad framing can be counterproductive in terms of the original contributions provided by citizens (Gastil, 2014; Kies and Wojcik, 2010).

Furthermore, sortitioned citizens under study did not have any real balanced training sessions. This is not always the case with other citizens' assemblies. To offer them diversified training was essential insofar as the citizens were selected because they were supposed to be indifferent, without any predefined opinion on European integration. However, experts were selected on the basis of obscure criteria, and citizens could not direct their own training by selecting experts, as observed elsewhere (Abels and Mölders, 2007).

However, it should be emphasised that, compared to previous EU deliberative and participatory experiences, the citizens' panels took place over a rather long period of time (three weekends on three occasions) and that such panels were relatively representative in socio-professional terms, with a slightly deliberate bias towards over-representation of young people. But the analysis contradicted the fact that a representative sample of citizens



in the sociological sense leads to diverse positions. Indeed, the citizens selected were initially indifferent to the EU and unable to criticise it; otherwise they would not have participated or faced costs in terms of time and energy. Compared to existing studies, the issue of self-selection bias was further explored. Perhaps a criterion of attitudes toward the EU should have been added if the organisers were to attract citizens with diverse views on the EU. As it was, the process could not be inclusive and open.

Furthermore, on the positive side, in comparison with previous EU experiences, the citizens' panels showed interactivity and conflictual forms of exchange, which is a guarantee of deliberative quality according to the criteria of the existing literature on deliberation (e.g. Manin, 1985). But it was pointed out that the conflicts were not so much about the EU's action but were due rather to the profile of the selected citizens, who were indifferent to the EU and unwilling to criticise it. Most of these non-opinionated citizens became sympathetic to European integration, which was reinforced by the low ideological diversity of the experts and the material from the digital platform briefing clearly returning to pro-European positions. There is thus a discrepancy between the way in which the citizens' panels were defined as free, inclusive, open, and transparent and the positions of the citizens expressed at the end of the process, few of whom question one or other modality of European integration.

Thus, the COFOE citizens' panels did not satisfactorily deliver on the guiding principles that the EU institutions initially laid down at the outset, namely inclusiveness, transparency and openness. More dissenting voices should have been included by the integration of a share of Eurocritical or Eurosceptic citizens, as well as experts with a variety of views on the EU (a contradictory and balanced training process). However, improving the inclusiveness and openness of such a deliberative process means stimulating criticism and questioning aspects of EU policies. This is an ongoing debate: is deliberation organised by the institutions really meant to be reflective of public action, even if it means underlining its limits? Or conversely, is it meant to legitimise it?



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